



“We are developing a new profession”: Samantha Cotterell

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Pictures: Design Sport

Doha based company Designsport specializes in the development of sport through architecture, sport overlay design and major event infrastructure. Coliseum spoke again to Founder and CEO Samantha Cotterell about designing for Qatar's major sporting events and her involvement in India's Commonwealth Games last year.

Coliseum: “Let us start from where we left off last time. What has changed since then? You said you had finished your work in India.”

Samantha Cotterell: “Yes, we finished the project in India at the end of October 2010. Working on the Delhi Commonwealth Games was a very exciting and challenging project! As the world knows, the media were extremely disparaging of event preparations for the Commonwealth Games, however, once the Opening Ceremony was staged and the first competitions began, the world could not ignore the evidence that Delhi had in fact risen to the challenge and successfully debuted on the stage of multisport mega events! From an Overlay perspective the project was a great success! When I say ‘Overlay’ I mean the entire project of building a team of local architects, mentoring them through the process, designing, developing and delivering. We have left a legacy to the Sport world of India and gained much in personal experience in return. India is a very complex and wonderful place which I could talk about for hours – but I won't hijack your interview!”

Coliseum: “What exactly was your job in India in relation to the Commonwealth Games?”

Samantha Cotterell: “I was Overlays Expert Advisor to Organising Committee. My role on paper was to advise across all matters pertaining to venue development, operational design, overlay design, development and implementation. However, in practice, my role included running the Overlays Department. My DESIGNSPORT colleague and I hired local architects to form the Overlays Team and together we mentored this budding young team to understand overlays and deliver the whole project.

It is amusing the manner in which I was engaged actually. I was headhunted through Facebook! At the time I was contacted I

immediately said I was not available for the job – it was already too late to plan the overlays for a major multi-sport event. But the Indians can be very insistent and hence managed to have me travel to Delhi to assess the situation. I proceeded to make them an offer I thought they would refuse, it was also unconventional in the sense that part of the first phase of works I proposed to carry out in the DESIGNSPORT studio in Qatar and once we had reached a base design we would use that to mentor and train the architects in India. This proposal was done as a kick start to a long process that was considerably delayed – much to my surprise they accepted and so our adventure began!”

Coliseum: “Which specific venues did you work on?”

Samantha Cotterell: “All venues. I was in charge of all competition and non-competition venues including Opening and Closing Ceremonies and Athlete Village. We worked with government authorities, local architecture studios, Ministries, all major stakeholders including International Sporting Federations, the Commonwealth Games Federation, to ensure that our designs were taken into consideration in the base building constructions. This was a challenging time as the whole of Delhi was one large construction site and delays were threatening the project. This meant that authorities were not receptive to our requests for changes – and hence further delays and cost. But it was an essential part of transforming venues from ‘legacy mode’ to ‘event mode’. As part of the job we set up all the tender documents for procuring construction and delivery of the overlays, we worked with the overlay vendors, preparing the detailed design, site-managing the build and overseeing the decommission and restoration of all sites.”

Coliseum: “What we heard here from the media was that it was a mixture of corrupt affairs, the fact that everything was done at the last minute and that when the first teams arrived the accommodation was not presentable. I also read that the Commonwealth Games failed to attract any extra tourists, so obviously the marketing side also failed to make these games attractive. I think it was not only the negative press – they had different reasons to hit on India – but my personal opinion is that it was much too early to give these games to India. What do you think?”

Samantha Cotterell: “Absolutely not! It is a little like saying ‘when is the right time to have a baby?’ There is no right time! Nothing prepares you for the overwhelming change to your world. The Games are like that! They come along and change the life of a city and its inhabitants forever. In fact it seems to me that it is better just to take the leap and deal with issues as they arise – the experience will only improve life!

Hosting a multisport event is a historical step for any country and one for which no amount of preparation will suffice. Having said that, there is no excuse as to how things were played out in Delhi.

Politics and corruption took centre stage and prevented India from righteously showcasing its abilities, its ambitions and its glory.”

Coliseum: “Now that the games are over and all the experts like you are leaving, what is the legacy now for India?”

Samantha Cotterell: “India, Delhi has been greatly enriched by the Games. When you go to other cities in India you just don’t breathe the same air as in Delhi. Delhi is now a city that is highly developed compared to other major Indian cities. In a compressed amount of time it gained an International Airport of the highest standards, a metro system that has nothing to envy any western system, a system of highways and roads that now facilitate circulation to, from and within the city. It boasts of first class sports facilities that stand out like rare jewels on the chaotic landscape. I think it has left some fantastic facilities for the future development of sport in that country, and I hope they get used the right way. Additionally, India now has a legacy in terms of human resources. The Games trained an enormous workforce in areas of expertise and professions that will greatly benefit developing India.

The legacy element is a core interest of Designsport. We are concerned with the development of the profession of the ‘sport architect’ and how this role supports bidding nations, host nations and all sporting authorities of the industry. We are developing a new profession through our commitment to the promotion of sport through architecture, design and new media.

Designsport’s legacy was training a team of thirty architects who can now take on sporting events in India with a certain amount of expertise. Some of our Architects have gone into positions with the IPL (Indian Premier League) and others with the Sports Authority of India. We witnessed a very steep learning curve in the architects we trained. When they first arrived on the job, most of them were junior architects, only a few years out of university. We threw them in at the deep end and offered much support but essentially relied on their abilities to grasp things quickly and hit the ground running! They had a very detailed and tedious task, they were in charge of many aspects beyond their scope and hence have come out with considerable experience and a good understanding of international sporting event requirements. They are of course no experts but they have an experience and they will continue to grow.”

Coliseum: “So what next? You are Qatar based and Qatar now got the big shot so what’s your plan for 2022?”

Samantha Cotterell: “Well...Qatar 2022 is the business of a small core group at this

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stage. Of course, like everyone, we would like to be involved and we look forward to such a possibility. However, at the moment we are involved in two exciting large projects in Qatar. I am currently the Advisor to the Director of Venues for the Arab Games where my role is similar to the role I had in India. The other project is a master plan to set up the framework for the development of sport in the country of Qatar. We are part of a consortium with Populous and MI Associates and my role is as local design lead. These are the two big projects for this year and, of course, we have a few other things in the pipeline which we are not allowed to talk about...so fingers crossed.”

Coliseum: “Qatar seems to be at the start

of the whole sport thing. I think it is not just about building nice venues, you have to start from the grass roots. In the Middle East sport is not really the main topic for the locals during the day and you have to implant the sporting or healthy lifestyle into their daily life, much the same as in India.”

Samantha Cotterell: “That’s right. This region does not have a sporting culture per se, but Qatar is a visionary country with enormous means and it has identified sport as a major force for developing a nation. The Qatar Olympic Committee has developed several initiatives to bring sport to the community and steer the country into a more sporting existence. It is recognized that sport is not just for the elite and that only a

developed sporting nation can support the creation of elite athletes.

I remember being told by the ex-CEO of the Australian Institute of Sport about a study which was carried out in Australia and which says that Australia is struggling to produce the top athletes of due to the sedentary lifestyle of children who today play on play stations and computers instead of playing outdoor developing basic motor skills by kicking around a ball, running, engaging in physical activity.

The health implications of this are quite severe and are costing the government in health services when these children grow into adults. Australia used to be the great

sporting nation but today it is a nation struggling with a growing rate of diabetes and other diseases associated with sedentary living. This shows that it really is important to introduce sport from the earliest age to support the healthy development of an entire population – Qatar appears to be taking all this very seriously!”

Coliseum: “We were thinking the Olympic bid would perhaps follow the World Cup win.”

Samantha Cotterell: “I am sure Qatar is thinking the same thing! And wouldn’t THAT be a great project to work on!!!”

Coliseum: “Samantha, again it was a pleasure talking to you; thanks.”



Samantha Cotterell (in the middle) and team.



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